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MARTYRDOM AND THE *FIRST EPISTLE* OF JOHN

by

M.J. EDWARDS
Oxford

"Little children, keep yourselves from idols". This sentence (*1 John* 5:21) has perplexed its commentators,[1] who have found it an unsuitable peroration to the *Epistle* both in content and in form. The *First Epistle* of John treats Christian service, not as a series of observances, but as an infinitely extended act of love; touching doctrine, its cardinal tenet is not that God is one, but that the One God sent his son to die as man. It would seem that John could not have been so platitudinous, or his audience so recalcitrant, as to require this banal prohibition, and it has therefore been interpreted to mean more (or less) than it says. Particular satisfaction may arise when the interpreter has turned John into a sermon for his own times:[2]

> The Greek word (*eidōlon*) often carries with it the suggestion of unreality... Not perhaps that the readers would be likely deliberately to take part in idolatrous rites ... our author has in view a movement among professing Christians advocating a far-reaching accommodation, if not with actual idolatry, at least with pagan ways of thought far removed from Christianity ... by idols he means ... all false or counterfeit ideas of God... It is in this sense that his meaning is apt to our own situation.

So Dodd, no mean authority, and with the support of many other scholars.[3] Yet John was not writing for our times, but for his, when a multitude of grim or enticing images continued to besiege the infant Church. Those who wanted meat would often find themselves eating the remnants of a sacrifice, and there were times when

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[1] Full studies and bibliographies of the recent literature are now available in K. Wengst, "Probleme der Johannesbriefe", *ANRW* 25.5 (1988) 3753-3772, and in J. Beutler, "Die Johannesbriefe in dem neuesten Literatur", *ibid.* 3773-90. For the theology of John's adversaries, see Wengst 3762-3 and Beutler 3780-3; for theories of their identity see Wengst 3758-61 and Beutler 3774-9. Further works are mentioned in nn. 2 and 3.

[2] C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles* (London 1946) 141-2.

[3] See e.g. the commentaries of Brown (New York 1982) 626-9, Alexander (London 1962) 135-6.

even readers of St Paul might find it expedient to reckon such foods unclean. The *Acts* (15:29) record a prohibition issued by the council of Jerusalem; Irenaeus denounces the Nicolaitians—somewhat tardily, since the author of *Revelation* had already assigned the rebuke to Christ himself; the hostility of Christians to these meals was so well known that Lucian has his Peregrinus expelled from a Church which "probably saw him eating one of the foods that they call accursed".[4]

This narrowness, if such it were, would be foreign to the spirit of John's *Epistle*; but since Paul wrote, the danger from the idols had been augmented by a new form of tribulation. The loyalty of the Church having once been compromised by informers and persecutors, the magistrates were apt to demand some proof of good intent. When this took the form of sacrifice before idols, no Christian could subscribe, and yet the penalty for refusal, under a governor such as Pliny or in a time of severe repression, would be death.[5]

Yet sacrifice to the pagan gods was apostasy, against which the church imposed the most awful sanctions. According to a document so early as the *Epistle to the Hebrews*, falling away is the one unforgivable sin (10:26ff).[6] The *Shepherd* of Hermas, only a little later,[7] offers limited comfort to those who have failed to withstand the great temptation. The Book of Revelation applies inducements rather than menaces by extolling the faith of the martyrs and their glorious deserts. Thus we see that such exhortations were necessary long before the third century, when sectaries tried to sever themselves completely from the lapsed, and even Catholics argued about

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[4] *Peregrinus* 16. Grossly misunderstood by G. Bagnani, "Peregrinus Proteus and the Christians", *Historia* 4 (1955) 111.

[5] Pliny, as is well known, executes the Christians for nothing more than obstinacy (Letter X.96). Trajan's rescript does not specify penalties, and it seems in any case that the sentence was often at the discretion of the magistrate: see Peregrinus 14 for unusual leniency and for cases of arbitrary justice G. E. M. de Ste Croix, "Why were the Early Christians Persecuted'? in *Past and Present* 26 (1963) 15.

[6] I regard *Hebrews* 10:29 as a proof that this passage is parallel with 6:6. *Hebrews* 12:4 warns believers that they must "resist unto blood"; 12:36-9 affords examples of endurance in persecution; 13:3 presupposes persecution since it enjoins the visiting of those in bonds.

[7] On the date and character of Hermas see R. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (Harmondsworth 1986) 281-90.

the terms which should be made before they admitted them back to the fold.[8]

So John will have apprehended, not a gradual inward decay, but rather a visible apostasy, a renunciation of Christ before the gods of wood and stone. Why else should he tell his flock in the closing verses of chapter 5 that, while most sins are forgiven to the prayerful (5:15; cf. 1:8-10), there is one—perhaps only one—against which no petitions can avail (5:16)? He wrote, not as now in circumstances of popular suspicion and silent ridicule, but at a time of fierce and open persecution: he uses no idle commonplace when he says that one who follows Christ is certain to be hated by the world (3:13).

"If a man says he loves God ... and loves not his brother ... he is a liar" (4:20). All a man's transactions with his brethren are the test of his devotion, but the extreme of love is a proof that few could offer, then as now: "he laid down his life for us ... we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (3:16). Sacrifice to idols, and you betray not only Christ but Christ's elect. John's closing admonition reveals the full price of that love which it is the purpose of his letter to extol.

What has this to do with the chief doctrinal burden of the *Epistle*, the refutation of those who will not confess (1:3, 3:23, 4:13, 5:1 etc.) that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God? That these were men who had failed the trial of martyrdom there can be little doubt. They went out from us, and therefore proved that they were never of us (2:19): the true believer will never succumb to the world. Where the Pauline school (*2 Thessalonians* 2:3) and the book of *Revelation* (13:11ff) expected an Antichrist to usher in the last days with a time of persecution, the lesson of this apostasy (1 John 2:18) is that many antichrists are now in the world. The epithet of the persecutor is fastened upon the renegade, for, in the eyes of this zealous homilist, anyone who will not spill his blood for Christ's sake is a tool of those by whom that blood is shed.

From an early time, however, there were theologies for weak brethren who would not take up their cross. Tertullian speaks in his sternest phase as though the refusal of martyrdom were the special preserve of certain docetic heresies: "tunc Gnostici erumpunt, tunc

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[8] On Cyprian, Stephen, Novatian etc. see W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford 1965) 247-388.

Valentiniani proserpunt, tunc omnes martyriorum refragatores ebulliuntur" (*Scorpiace* 15).[9] Eusebius claims that martyrdom was repugnant to the school of Basilides, Irenaeus that voluntary complaisance with the idolaters was the most widespread and the deadliest of all heretical snares.[10] The reasoning of the sectaries will have been logical enough. If one denies the coming of Christ in the flesh, one must deny that he came to redeem it; no courage could escort it to eternity, and no offence could add to its condemnation. For those, however, whose immaterial portion has been delivered by a spiritual saviour, the flesh will perish without involving the ruin of the soul.[11] The converse is that the pains of Christ make suffering an instrument of redemption, a belief to which Ignatius of Antioch bears an early and fervent testimony:[12]

> And if as some atheists (I mean unbelievers) say, his suffering was a sham ... why am I a prisoner? Why do I want to fight with wild beasts? In that case I shall die to no purpose (*Trallians* 10).

The same reasoning fires the *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*: here it is said that the charlatans themselves admit the resemblance between the sufferings of the faithful and the passion of the Christ in whom they believe.[13] The *Epistle to the Ephesians* styles such heretics dogs:[14]

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[9] On the dating of the *Scorpiace* see T. Barnes, "Tertullian's Scorpiace", *JTS* 26 (1969) 105-32. These arguments against assigning it to his Montanistic period do not seem to me conclusive, though it is true that the work has few clear Montanist traits. We must say at least that it displays in an inchoate form those sentiments which drove the Father at last into an open breach with the Church.

[10] Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* III.27 and IV.4.7 (citing Agrippa Castor). On the refusal of martyrdom see Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* IV.33.9; on the Basilideans *ibid.* I.24.5; on the Nicolaitians *ibid.* I.26.1-2 and *Revelation* 2.13-17. For a fuller discussion see W. H. C. Frend, "The Gnostic Sects and the Roman Empire" in *JEH* 5 (1954) 25-37.

[11] Frend (1954), citing Clement, *Stromateis* IV.81, suggests that "Gnostics" (i.e. any docetic heretics of the early Christian centuries) regarded all suffering as a proof of sin, and deprecated martyrdom for that reason. This appears to be true of the Basilideans, but the process of thought that I have described requires only the ordinary docetic premisses and it is this that supplies the converse to the reiterated arguments of Ignatius.

[12] The translation is from C. C. Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers* (London 1953) 100. In citing Ignatius, the *Didache* and the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* I use Richardson's numeration of paragraphs.

[13] *Smyrnaeans* 5.1. For similar views see *Apologia Aristidis* 15.8, *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 14.2 and Lucian, *Peregrinus* 13.

[14] *Ephesians* 7:1-2; cf. *2 Peter* 2:22 on apostasy; *Philippians* 3:2 on Judaizers may also have prompted Ignatius to use this image. At *Didache* 9:5 the unbaptized are excluded from the Eucharist (see below) because "it is not fitting to give the children's food to dogs" (*Matthew* 7:6).

there is only one physician, "of flesh yet spiritual, born yet unbegotten, God incarnate ... sprung from Mary as well as God, first subject to suffering, then beyond it—Jesus Christ our Lord" (7.2). The *Epistle to the Romans* proclaims that Ignatius' one desire is to share the sacrifice of Jesus (3.2)—the death, as the author is careful to state in many places (*Trallians* 9.1-2, *Smyrnaeans* 1.2 and 3.1-2), of one who truly died and truly rose. Ignatius writes in his chains and on the eve of execution, having learnt, like John, what it is to incur the hatred of the world (*Romans* 3:3).

The Bishop of Antioch's enemies seem to be Gnostics in the original sense, a school of Jews who quote the Old Testament freely while denying the incarnation.[15] Those of John cannot be defined so narrowly, but they would not believe in a Saviour whom his friends had touched and handled (1 John 1:1ff), and they would not believe that the man who had been called Jesus could be hailed as the Son of God. They would seem to have believed in a human Jesus, but one who was only a man; to judge by the opening verses, they must also have held to some doctrine of a Saviour, perhaps reasoning, like Cerinthus, that the spiritual Christ adopted Jesus during the time between his baptism and the Cross.[16] John declares that he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God shall be saved (4:15); it is those who hold fast to this who will escape the "sin unto death".

The objection may be raised, that if it was John's chief aim in writing to disarm the pagan idols of their terrors and attractions, he has approached it very obliquely, since he devotes his first two chapters to a comfortable assurance that all sins can be blotted out by the death of Christ. Reach it he does, however, when he reminds his flock that that same death gives Christ a claim upon them: they must lay down their lives for the brethren, and be on earth what Christ has been himself (4:18). John has pursued a sound pastoral method by multiplying words of comfort in order first to disguise, and then to compel assent to, the bitter message of his final exhortation.

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[15] See E. Molland, "The Heretics Combatted by Ignatius of Antioch", *JEH* 5 (1954) 1-6 for the argument that the targets of Ignatius' polemic are always the same. On the Jewish origins of Gnosticism see R. M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (New York 1966). On the definition of Gnosticism see now M. J. Edwards, "Gnostics and Valentinians in the Church Fathers", *JTS* 1989.

[16] This appears to be the theory of J. A. T. Robinson in his *Twelve New Testament Studies* (London 1962) 134-8.

It may also be that the promises of forgiveness have their own didactic value. Rigorists in the Church of the first three centuries were apt to maintain that all sins were equally mortal, or expiable only by the blood of the transgressor;[17] not only was the refusal of martyrdom sinful, but martyrdom itself was the only possible atonement for other crimes. This was itself a refusal to accept the work of the Saviour, and such tendencies, inflamed perhaps by the spectacle of promiscuous transgression which was exhibited by certain Christian sects,[18] may have manifested themselves in new asperities which the author of this Epistle thought it charitable and prudent to restrain.

Two of the precepts most frequently inculcated in this letter are that Jesus calls his Church to abide in him, and that those who do abide in him will overcome the fickle threats and pleasures of the world. In other parts of the New Testament there is no doubt that to overcome is to brave the terrors of martyrdom:[19] it is therefore to the fortitude of his hearers that the writer appeals when he tells them (a) that the world is sure to hate them; (b) that the world is not eternal, therefore weaker and less valuable than they are; (c) that the world will in fact be overcome. The promise of overcoming the world occurs with particular frequency in the fifth chapter (5:4 *bis* and 5:5) and leads to a testimony which is often misunderstood.

Christ, says John, came in three ways: by water, by the Spirit and by blood. The significance of the first two cannot be hidden from any reader of the New Testament: Christ underwent the baptism of John, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him, an event which is commemorated even in a rudimentary creed (*1 Timothy*

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[17] E.g. Tertullian at *De Pudicitia* I.6ff. Though no-one doubts the Montanist character of this work this austerity may be a sign of Tertullianism rather than Montanism. On Tertullian and martyrdom see T. D. Barnes, *Tertullian* (Oxford 1971) 164-86.

[18] E.g. the Carpocratians at Irenaeus, *A.H.* I.27. However, the frequency of such slanders in controversy between Christian sects and between pagans and Christians leaves room for much scepticism: see R. M. Grant, "Charges of 'Immorality' against Various Religious Groups in Antiquity" in R. Van den Broek and M. J. Vermaseren (eds.), *Essays on Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religion* (Leiden 1981) 161-70.

[19] Thus *Revelation* 12:11 speaks expressly of resistance to persecution. *Revelation* 2:7 follows denunciation of the Nicolaitians; 2:10 follows the promise of tribulation; 2:15 follows an allusion to Nicolaitian practices; 3:5 follows a reference to the white robes which are bestowed upon the martyrs at 6:3ff.; 3:12 follows a counsel of patience. See also 2:26 and 3:21.

3:16). One might expect the last to have been an equally manifest proclamation of the Saviour, and we surely need not investigate any refinements of heretical theology[20] to determine that the proof and seal of Christ's redeeming mission, the act through which he announced and secured the Kingdom, was his voluntary death.

The three witnesses on earth which are alluded to in the following verse are evidently the counterparts of those that accompanied Christ. The water presents few problems; that all believers were sealed with the Spirit is a Pauline commonplace (*Romans* 8:9, *1 Corinthians* 2:16, *2 Corinthians* 2:6 etc.); some editors hold that the blood is the wine of the Eucharist,[21] which is well enough since this was an expectant representation of the Saviour's triumph in death.[22] However, it is John's belief that those who embrace the death of Christ may be called upon by Christ to embrace their own: he therefore enjoins his flock to be willing to give the Greek word *martus* the special meaning which it bears in its English form.

Words for knowledge abound in this *Epistle*. If the author is writing against a primitive school of Gnostic thought, his adversaries are likely to have held that they would be saved by the mere acquisition of certain esoteric truths. John affirms only what he regards as the known apostolic deposit,[23] but his concept of saving knowledge includes three stages: (1) the knowledge that Christ came in the flesh; (2) the knowledge that he was crucified in that flesh for the sins of the world; (3) the taking of that knowledge to heart, so that one who follows Christ is prepared to follow him to the same end. Such knowledge is both cognitive and prescriptive: to know the work of Christ is to know our own.

Our study has shown that the *First Epistle* of John is a tract in time of persecution. The duty of love is enjoined upon all Christians because teachers who do not acknowledge the union of God and

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[20] On Christ's blood as that shed at his crucifixion and the water as that of his baptism see Dodd (1946) 129-31. I would prefer not to rest any argument on Cerinthus, despite Robinson (1962) 134 and Alexander (1962) 119.

[21] See on this Brown (1982) 582-5 for a full discussion.

[22] I Cor 10-11:29. It is interesting to note that the opponents of Ignatius refused to celebrate the Eucharist on the grounds that it presupposed a coming of Christ in the flesh (*Smyrnaeans* 7.1 etc).

[23] I have not assumed any date for the *Epistle*, but if, as is almost certain, it was written before the middle of the second century A.D. it fell in a period when orthodoxy and heresy were still to be clearly defined: W. Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, translated with appendices (Philadelphia 1971) remains a convincing treatment.

man in Christ will find no reason for perseverance in the flesh. The greatest scandal presented by such teaching is that it gives the weak a pretext for abandoning their faith in the time of trial. It cannot be said that to characterize the *Epistle* in this way is to solve all difficulties: it remains as hard as ever to reconcile the promise of inexhaustible forgiveness with the statements that a Christian does not sin.[24] Nevertheless this reading has some value if it tells us why the Apostle of love was thought to be both the author of this letter and the implacable visionary of the *Book of Revelation*, who condemns the unfaithful to horrors past conceiving and reserves his patience for those who "overcame by the word of their testimony and by the blood of the lamb" (*Revelation* 12:11). And it is always salutary to be reminded of the conditions in which the early Christians wrote before we flatter ourselves that we have found in them something "apt to our situation".

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[24] On this and on the similar discrepancy between chapters 1-2 and chapter 3 see Dodd (1946) 134-7. Perhaps unrepentant sin is held to be the mark in daily life of those who will not withstand the sterner trial; and teachers who connive at the sin of apostasy will no doubt condone all others.